The Gay Buddhist Fellowship supports Buddhist practice in the gay men’s community. It is a forum that brings together the diverse Buddhist traditions to address the spiritual concerns of gay men in the San Francisco Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF’s mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

Defining Zhi-De

BY DELBERT RAY COLLETT

The underlying essence that animates our bodies is pure and untainted. Call it energy, a soul, pure consciousness, whatever. In any event, that essence has no need for physical enjoyments. Nevertheless, we become attached to the body, believing it to be who we are, forgetting that part of us which is pure—our true nature. Ignorance arises and we strive to satisfy the body, even though it is merely a shell we will ultimately discard.

The confusions of men are great and the pursuit of happiness is strong. This gives rise to extreme dualism. Ignorance leads us to believe in an inherently existent self. The belief in a self gives rise to attachments. Attachments give rise to aversions. Anger and hatred come when we feel a threat to “I” or “mine.” Of course, this description is simplified, but I use it as a base to explain something that has been foremost on this obscured mind of late.

Peace. A simple word. In Tibetan, zhi-de is a kind of peaceful state. As I watch the evening news, I notice that everyone seems to want this peaceful state—even those world leaders who are sending their young citizens to die in war. Now I don’t claim any deep realizations. Certainly I’m far from holding all the answers about any topic. However, I may know a little bit about this peaceful state everyone claims to be after. How? Well, I have sought violence as a means to attain what I thought was happiness and peace. Through this I’ve found time and again what comes out of the violent pursuit of a solution. Never has a peaceful state, or zhi-de, been the outcome. Nevertheless I persevered. Same pursuit. Same process. Same outcome.

As I look around at the prison dormitory which houses this sack of excrement, I am reminded of the words of Count Pierre Bezukov, a character in Tolstoy’s War and Peace. After being turned away by a sentinel, he exclaimed, “The soldier did not let me pass. They took me and shut me up. They hold me captive. What, me? Me? My immortal soul? Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!”

It matters not where the body is. The essence labeled “I” can, with full certainty, reflect that peace—true Peace—does not come through being in a par-
ticular place, possessing a certain thing, holding a particular social status, nor through violent means. These things tend to lead only to the reinforcement of all-pervasive tendencies.

Peace must begin on an individual, personal level. Before we can influence the world into peaceful solutions, we have to assure our own zhi-de. We must subdue our own aggressive tendencies before we can influence and awaken the Angulimalas of the world. However, achieving this peace is no small matter and obstacles abound. Beings have been obscured since time without beginning, so tendencies to protect perceived pleasures abound. Okay, at this point, most people I know cultivate seeds of doubt when we talk about “beginningless.” So let’s try to clear up doubts about this concept before we continue on our journey for peace.

When Buddha was asked where it all began, he explained that even an enlightened mind could not conceive of a beginning; therefore no beginning could exist. His Holiness the Dalai Lama states, “Big Bang? No problem. Just not the first big bang.” Creation, existence, and destruction are continuous events, occurring simultaneously on many levels at all times. Time is a linear measurement of these events based on man’s limitation of being able to hold only one single object at a time. We may think that we’re multitasking, but in reality we jump from object to object like jumping lottery balls waiting for an interesting number to come up so that we can hold it an instant longer than the other fanciful thoughts.

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An enlightened mind, on the other hand, is capable of holding and evaluating a multitude of perception objects simultaneously and sees them for what they are: bits and pieces, particles and parts, which have been combining, separating, and sharing in one way or another over and over again. Up is merely a part of down, left, right, front, and back. Realizing that all phenomena are neither part of, nor separate from, any perceived object, where is the reference point? Labels are all we have. Take away the labels and there is no reference point. So with no point from which to be labeled, where is the beginning?

As long as there is a mind that perceives dualistically with reference points, or labels, there is a concept of time. Beginningless time, therefore, is that point of no reference. No duality. No labels. No action. No self. No other. Better yet, no concept whereby any of this can be conceived of. That is beginningless time.

Our propensity, through countless similar perceptions, is to become attached toward our view of pleasurable objects, desire separation from the undesirable, and hold indifference toward the neutral. This is where jealousy, ill-will, anger, etc. are born.

Whenever our ideal of “I,” mine, peace, or pleasure is threatened, we impute a reaction of aversion toward the perceived source. However, this perception is delusive and is typically far removed from the ultimate cause. We perform actions, believing they will bring us closer to happiness and remove us from suffering. These mental constructions are constantly changing, however, and their defining boundaries are forever in motion, merging and transmuting one into another. We must constantly re-evaluate. Frustration abounds and emotional responses are manufactured to strike out at the world we can’t control. The problem is, we do control it. We are the perceiver. So our view of phenomena is just that—
those who rely on us for wisdom. It's obvious we're familiar with these teachings, so physician, heal thyself!

If all perceived phenomena are a reflection of our own mind, then what can be said of wars, crime, violence, and disease? Certainly there is collective karma involved, as well as all-pervasive tendencies. However, we cannot eliminate these events from the world until we utterly destroy their roots from within our own mind, or convince ourselves that “everyone does it” and “everyone thinks like that.”

The Preta and Asura mentality perceptions prove to them that gain and threat are present at all times. Short periods of growth are followed by crime and then again prison. Politics. Release. Comfort. Crime. Prison. . . Once the person gets comfortable, he feels a reward is due and the cycle begins with: Comfort, reward, crime, prison, politics, release. . .

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better yet, destroy all our conceptual constructions. This is the war that must really be fought. We have found the enemy and it is us.

I have not even come close to eliminating all my dualistic constructions. This ultimate goal I do aspire toward, however, and I have achieved a small degree of success along this path. I’ll explain what I’ve found as true.

In prison, there is a defined political system structured around race, age, home neighborhood, crime, and economic status. Not much different from the real world, huh? This structure is managed by fear, intimidation, violence, and repression. Any attempt to step out of this structure is dealt with severely. None of these political boundaries is ever to be crossed without reprisal. “Shot-callers” dictate punishments and privileges. These managers are typically chosen by shows-of-force and not by any democratic means. The standard seems to be that whoever speaks the loudest and with the most conviction (regardless of how meaningless the words may be) wins.

We are in-the-mix when we interact within the political system. I have spent a large portion of my life behind prison fences and I admit to having been in-the-mix many times. Understand that this lifestyle is not specific to a prison setting for these individuals so involved. It carries on outside where even legitimate activity reflects these all pervasive prison habits. Everything is all about immediate gratification and gain. Money, drugs, power, and sex are where these pleasures are most readily satisfied and they become fuel for all actions performed by one in-the-mix. All perceptions of such a person are so obscured that they Sound familiar? It should, because if you change the labels this can describe every cyclic suffering we experience.

Six years ago, I decided that I wanted out of this cycle, and the only escape that made sense to me was through Dharma.

Bit by bit I stepped out of the mix. I began looking at my mind and observers threw labels at me like spears from Mara’s legions: Freak, pansy, hippie, fag—all kinds of labels I didn’t even know the meanings of. I wasn’t cool anymore. I was bottom of the food chain. Funny, but some of the worst treatment has come from the “religious” guys who themselves are the recipients of much scorn. Karma has truly played out, for my previous acts of cruelty began ripening. I have been verbally and physically attacked, yelled at while meditating. I have struggled with prison authorities to allow meditation groups. The worst struggles of all, however, have been what I’ve faced on the war-front—this darkened, obscured battlefield which hides a purity I’m fortunate enough to catch glimpses of now and then. Certainly frustration has escalated at times, tempting me to strike out. Nevertheless, I have continued to persevere, thinking of great masters who have endured much more pain than I to find awakening. I witness that lasting zhi-de is available to us on a universal level, yet we miss out on it merely by trying to find it someplace out there when it lies available within.

There is a song by the alternative rock band TOOL which speaks of how we spend hours watching movies and television shows with violent content. The more violence, the greater number of tickets sold and viewers glued to their flat-paneled, rectangular altars. Yet we
are appalled by the robbery down the street. Like addicts, we crave an endless fix of violence daily and it's great “from a good, safe distance,” as the song goes. The singer hits home by comparing us to vampires who desire all death but our own. What do we expect our world to be like when we give glamorous, elaborate awards to the biggest explosions and the most convincing gore? Doesn’t this put us in-the-mix? We condone and even support the very thing we are against. Phil Collins called it a Land of Confusion. How much truer

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could it be? We know the process to eliminate violent influences out of our lives, yet what was the last movie you rented? How many died? How many stole? How much infidelity transpired? During the movie, how many times did you desire (people or things)?

How many people watch the evening news to truly be informed? How many watch to keep tabs on the latest death toll? How about to point blame? To say, “I told you so”? Excitement? So what about the good news? The news programs, especially, are governed by ratings. Face it, airing a news program that focuses on the positive news would guarantee a loss of advertising revenue because people would not tune in.

So where does all this take us? Right back to where we all started: naked and alone, trapped, with nothing to look at except our own minds.

Earlier I told you some of the trials I’ve faced in trying to transform my mind. Well, every single obstacle is worth it. When I walk the yard, I don’t see politics, opportunities to “come up,” disrespect/respect, or threats. Prison hasn’t changed, but the perceiving mind has.

People around me recognize this peace and tend to look out for me. Many asked how to meditate. I do sense a lot of fear and suffering, but those around me the though the strife may be half a world away, a difference could be made. Help those close to you awaken those chose to them. On and on . . . .

Even before this awareness reaches the global level, it is still an impact to be reckoned with. The neighborhood affects the municipality. The municipality affects the country, which affects the state, the nation, the world. By positively affecting those around you, you affect government policy.

Today a political analyst was asked if a particular candidate could win. He replied that if the politician could get enough financial support he may win, but should the opponent receive more money, he would lose. Whatever happened to having the best policy? When consumers have made their choice between Pepsi and Coke, selling candidate A and B is where advertising dollars are made. These men require hair stylists, color coordinators, script writers, media strategists, make-up artists, tailors, publicists, personal assistants, drivers, and who knows what else—all so they can appear average-looking. What’s more, these men and women spend hundreds of millions of dollars each to compete for an eighty-thousand-dollar-a-year job. Who pays for all this? We do. Can you maintain two homes and a vacation home on eighty-grand a year? I tried. Didn’t work.
We must not let our lives and decisions be made by marketers. Being mindful of your habits affects the local economy. You can bet that seemingly small changes are felt in Board Rooms, and even on a larger scale. Communities affect communities.

“I will not acknowledge, nor support, violence with my entertainment dollar.”

“I will not purchase goods and services where profits may support violence.”

“I will live and promote a peaceful, ethical, and moral lifestyle.”

Make these statements your mantra, then truly live by them, constantly keeping watch over your three doors of body, speech, and mind. Assure that you reflect these ideals to all who observe you and, believe me, people will watch, eagerly awaiting your failure. When you don’t fail, however, they will want what you have.

Meditate to develop insight and to be a reflection of peace in all you do. It won’t take long until you start feeling the benefits yourself. A little longer and your lifestyle will replicate itself in others. Just as a single cell divides and becomes a baby, you are giving birth to a world that recognizes its own potential.

We got older and lived good lives (comfort). Then, as a reward, we felt we deserved a little more (crime). Now it seems we’re caught up again (prison) and our close friends in the world are following out example. Recidivism: It’s not just for prisoners anymore.

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As for me, I’ve found a way to live in Dharma and thus, zhi-de. I may not have a dime to my name, but I’m building the only wealth that will matter at the time of death. Even though this body must remain in a temporal prison for the next three or four years, I’m as free as I’ll ever be until full awakening. This mind is boundless and I am blessed with a Perfect Human Birth that can be of service to others, like being able to share words such as these.

Should you have found meaning in any of these words, then please contemplate them and share them with others. You may have realized this already and are trying to practice this peaceful lifestyle. If so, great. Let me congratulate you and offer my encouragement. In our fairly new global community (it’s actually been that way forever, we just haven’t seemed to realize it), where communication and information rule, it should not take long for word of peace-

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There! You are no longer in-the-mix. You are a true cause of zhi-de on a much larger scale. Sure, we could rally and march in protest against political unrest, corruption and war. This worked in the 1960’s, right? I don’t think so. What I believe happened was that a new generation of educated, peace-seeking people would not stand for being part of violence. Television and movies of that age tended to promote love, art, and comedy. Look at history and you will find that we build societies as a reflection of our citizens’ coming of age.

So what happened? We forgot. We became confused. We got complacent. Four decades ago we were in-the-mix (politics). We got out of our negative situation (release).ful communities to spread, planting seeds throughout vast distances. We must be examples for others to find worth, however. Imagine the day when thinking of zhi-de we can say with certainty, “everyone does it” and “everybody thinks like that.” Now there is a mix I want to be in

Delbert Ray Collett is a Buddhist prisoner in San Luis Obispo. You may write him at the following address:
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Your Thrift Store 
Donations Earn Money for GBF

GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs to the Community Thrift Store (CTS) and GBF will receive a quarterly check based on the volume of items sold. This is a great way to support our Sangha, and the community. So far this year we have received over $800 through members’ generosity. Bring your extra clothing and other items to CTS at 623 Valencia St between 10am and 5pm, any day of the week. The donation door is around the corner on Sycamore Alley (parallel to and between 17th and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40. Information: (415) 861-4910.

Prisoners Urgently Need Buddhist Books

The most frequent request from gay Buddhist prisoners, other than for pen pals, is for books. In many prisons, they are circulated among small sitting groups and are used in daily and group practice. All books are welcome, particularly those suitable for beginners. If you have any available, please call Baruch Golden at (415) 810-9990, or email him at baruchg50@hotmail.com. Baruch will arrange to collect them and get them to prisoners.
Sunday Sittings

10:30 am to 12 noon
Every Sunday followed by a talk or discussion, at the San Francisco Buddhist Center, 37 Bartlett Street (near 21st St between Mission and Valencia).

MUNI: 14 Mission or 49 Van Ness-Mission, alight at 21st St, walk 1/2 block.
BART: 24th and Mission, walk 3 1/2 blocks. PARKING: on street (meters free on Sundays) or in adjacent New Mission Bartlett Garage. The Center is handicapped accessible.

June and July
We’re going to be exploring in four Sundays over June and July the human voice as an ally of awareness.

June 3  Poetry Day
Bring a poem to share that captures something of your spiritual journey, where you are now, or is just totally gorgeous. Original work welcome! And if it’s a special passage from something not formally a poem, that’s great too. In preparation, maybe experiment reading the poem out loud in different ways.

June 10  Justin Hecht
Long-time GBF member Justin Hecht is a psychologist who practices Jungian Analytic therapy and has been practicing Buddhist meditation for many years. In his presentation to our Sangha, Justin will discuss the intersection of these two disciplines, which have informed and supported his work and life.

June 17  Brian Baker
Brian Baker is an acclaimed pianist and choral conductor. He has a doctorate in music and serves on the faculty of the College of San Mateo. In addition to serving as Music Director of the Masterworks Chorale in San Mateo and the Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, he maintains a private teaching studio and is an active vocal coach. Brian will lead us in an exploration of breath, voice production, resonance, and the singing of some old chestnuts famous for their capacity to enliven.

June 24  Discussion

July 1  Dave Cooperberg
Dave’s meditation practice began in the early 1970’s with the Zen community of Genjoji in Sonoma County. His psychotherapy practice began also in the early 1970’s. In 1990 he helped form a group of meditators called the Gay Men’s Meditation Retreat that continues to have small, twice yearly retreats. Both practices, psychotherapy and meditation, have focused on gay men working to be more mindful.

July 8  Sean Feit
Sean Feit has practiced meditation (Zen & Vipassana) since 1993, and Yoga since 1994. He’s been leading meditation and chanting practice since 1999. He is a student of Jack Kornfield and Eugene Cash at Spirit Rock, where he completed the first Dedicated Practitioners Program. He was a monk in Burma in 2002, and has recently returned from practice in India. He teaches meditation and Yoga, piano and harmonium, and leads Kirtan in his native Bay Area. Sean says, “Chanting is the practice of love made audible.”

July 15  Maia Duerr
Maia Duerr was the executive director of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship from 2004 until June 2007. Committed to exploring the intersection of social change and dharma practice, she engaged in her first civil disobedience during a March 2003 action at the Westover Air Base in Chicopee, MA, at the start of the Iraq war. A Buddhist practitioner since 1993, Maia received lay ordination from Roshi Joan Halifax into the Order of Interbeing and the Zen Peacemaker Order. She is currently a student in the Soto Zen lineage of Suzuki Roshi, and has lived and practiced at the San Francisco Zen Center. A true Sagittarian, Maia loves to travel and has made pilgrimages to Tibet and Bali.

July 22  Emilio Gonzalez
Emilio has been practicing Qigong and Tai Chi Chuan since 1973. A senior student of Grand Master Kai Ying Tung, he taught Tai Chi at 50 Oak Street in San Francisco for over twenty years. In the 1990s, he established a special Qigong for Health class for people with HIV and other chronic illness. He also taught at San Francisco State University, at Mills College, and at various national conferences on Traditional Chinese Medicine. In 1996 he produced a best-selling Qigong video that was broadcast nationwide on PBS. He will lead us in an experiential session exploring the impact of Qigong and the Seven Healing Sounds on meditation and community.

July 29  Discussion
By the power and truth of this practice, may all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness, may all be free from sorrow and the causes of sorrow, may all never be separated from the sacred happiness which is without sorrow, and may all live in equanimity, without too much attachment or too much aversion, and live believing in the equality of all that lives.

—GBF dedication of merit